

In transforming his acclaimed stop-motion short film *9* into a full-length CGI animated feature, director Shane Acker had help from the best in business.

UCLA graduate Shane Acker holds dual Masters Degrees in Architecture and Animation, qualifications that have shaped his feature film debut *9* into an elaborate animated fantasy, set in a post-apocalyptic world where machines have decimated the human population. In the final days, however, a scientist creates nine little rag dolls and imbues them with a spark of life in the hope that they can ultimately defeat the remaining machines, one of which is a fearsome mechanical 'beast'.

9 is an expansion of Acker's 11 minute student thesis film of the same name (or number), completed in 2004 and nominated for an Academy Award in 2006 (for Best Animated Short Film) after accruing numerous awards and audience acclaim on the independent film festival circuit. The short film eventually caught the attention of visionary filmmakers Tim Burton (*Alice in Wonderland*) and Timur Bekmambetov (*Night Watch*) who, together with producers Jim Lemley and Diana Ginsburg, helped Acker develop *9* as a full-length animated feature.

"The short was among the most extraordinary 11 minutes of film I've ever seen," notes Tim Burton. "Shane's conception was and is a stunningly detailed and hauntingly beautiful universe that resonates not only visually, but emotionally."

For Acker, the opportunity to realise *9* as a feature was a dream come true. "I had fallen

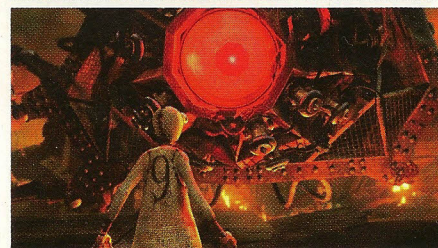
in love with the world and the characters, and my head was full of ideas of what I would want to do to show more of it, and more of them as they discovered the world and themselves."

Acker refers to the characters that inhabit the world of *9* as "stitchpunks", a term which best describes the aesthetic of the protagonists, whose resemblance to toys is purely superficial; these tough little critters have been created to survive in a blasted landscape and salvage the legacy of civilisation.

"*9*'s tribe is a metaphor for developing humanity," Acker explains. "They possess the power of adaptation and invention. In contrast, the beast that is pursuing them is a hunter, made from bones and bits of broken machinery. Yet it desires to assimilate, which is why it is stealing these beings' souls."

Screenwriter Pamela Pettler, who has collaborated on several projects with Burton, worked with Acker to expand the story, which she sees as a universal tale about struggle, hope and optimism.

Says Acker, "We now had the opportunity to explore the world from the perspective of these beings but also to get at the back story; to get to 'post-apocalyptic' there had to be a 'pre-apocalyptic'. We were able to delve deeper into why the world ended the way it did, what



happened to the humans, and the extent of hope.

"So while we're bringing people into a fantasy world with a different sensibility, they're on an emotional journey with characters who are very human in their emotions and interactions."

• *9* is available on DVD and Blu-ray on April 10.